DR JOHNSON

Some Observations and Judgements upon Life and Letters

CHOSEN BY

JOHN HAYWARD

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DR. JOHNSON

SAMUEL JOHNSON

Born at Lichfield, Staffordshire, 18th September 1709
Died in London, 13th December 1784, aged 75

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NOTE

The following examples of Dr. Johnson's conversation, repartee, aphorisms, reflections and *obiter dicta* from Boswell and other biographers, as well as quotations from his prose writings, have been chosen to illustrate briefly, and according to subject, some of his characteristic opinions and prejudices about Life and Letters. Only one major source has been left untapped. This is the collection of critical biographies, commonly called *The Lives of the Poets*, which contain his considered literary judgements. These could not have been adequately represented within the scope of this miscellaneous anthology, and have therefore been omitted.

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LIFE

SIC VITA

Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed.

*

Dr. Johnson used frequently to observe, that there was more to be endured than enjoyed, in the general condition of human life; and frequently quoted those lines of Dryden:

'Strange cozenage! None would live past years again,
Yet all hope pleasure from what still remain.'

For his part, he said, he never passed that week in his life which he would wish to repeat, were an angel to make the proposal to him.

RESIGNATION

If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure.

HOPE

Hope is itself a species of happiness, and, perhaps, the chief happiness which this world affords: but, like all other pleasures immoderately enjoyed, the excesses of hope must be expiated by pain; and

expectations improperly indulged must end in disappointment. If it be asked what is the improper expectation which it is dangerous to indulge, experience will quickly answer, that it is such expectation as is dictated not by reason but by desire; expectation raised not by the common occurrences of life, but by the wants of the expectant; an expectation that requires the common course of things to be changed, and the general rules of action broken.

DETACHMENT

Without asserting Stoicism, it may be said, that it is our business to exempt ourselves as much as we can from the power of external things. There is but one solid basis of happiness; and that is, the reasonable hope of a happy futurity.

VANITY OF VANITIES

Boswell observed 'that things were done upon the supposition of happiness; grand houses were built, fine gardens were made, splendid places of publick amusement were contrived, and crowded with company.' *Johnson*—'Alas, Sir, these are all only struggles for happiness. When I first entered Ranelagh, it gave an expansion and gay sensation to my mind, such as I never experienced any where else. But, as Xerxes wept when he viewed his immense army, and considered that not one of that great multitude would be alive a hundred years afterwards, so it went to my heart to consider that there was not one in all that brilliant circle, that was not afraid to go home and think; but that the thoughts of each individual there were to be distressing when alone.'

TRIVIALITIES

'There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.'

PEEVISHNESS

Peevishness is generally the vice of narrow minds, and except when it is the effect of anguish and disease, by which the resolution is broken, and the mind made too feeble to bear the lightest addition to its miseries, proceeds from an unreasonable persuasion of the importance of trifles. The proper remedy against it is, to consider the dignity of human nature, and the folly of suffering perturbation and uneasiness, from causes unworthy of our notice.

IDEA AND REALITY

I know not any thing more pleasant, or more instructive, than to compare experience with expectation, or to register from time to time the difference between idea and reality. It is by this kind of observation that we grow daily less liable to be disappointed.

FREE-WILL

All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it.

*

'Sir, we *know* our will is free, and *there's* an end on't.'

Men will submit to any rule, by which they may be exempted from the tyranny of caprice and of chance.

WAR

As war is the extremity of evil, it is surely the duty of those whose station entrusts them with the care of nations, to avert it from their charge. There are diseases of an animal nature which nothing but amputation can remove; so there may, by the deprivation of human passions, be sometimes a gangrene in collected life, for which fire and the sword are the necessary remedies; but in what can skill or caution be better shown, than in preventing such dreadful operations, while there is room for gentler methods?

INSECURITY

War is not the whole business of life, it happens but seldom and every man, either good or wise, wishes that its frequency were still less. That conduct which betrays designs of future hostility, if it does not excite violence, will always generate malignity; it must for ever exclude confidence and friendship, and continue a cold and sluggish rivalry, and a slow reciprocation of indirect injuries, without the bravery of war or the security of peace.

MISERY

Misery is caused, for the most part, not by a heavy crush of disaster, but by the corrosion of less visible evils which canker enjoyment and undermine security. The visit of an invader is necessarily rare, but domestic animosities allow no cessation.

GRIEF

The safe and general antidote against sorrow is employment. It is commonly observed, that among soldiers and seamen, though there is much kindness, there is little grief. They see their friend fall without any lamentation which is indulged in security and idleness, because they have no leisure to spare from the care of themselves; and whoever shall keep his thoughts equally busy, will find himself equally unaffected with irretrievable losses.

SORROW

Tears are often found where there is little sorrow, and the deepest sorrow without any tears.

SELF-INTEREST

To act from pure benevolence is not possible for finite beings. Human benevolence is mingled with vanity, interest, or some other motive.

POVERTY

'Sir, all the arguments which are brought to represent poverty as no evil, show it to be evidently a great evil. You never find people labouring to convince you that you may live very happily upon a plentiful fortune.'

MONEY-MAKING

There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money.

BOREDOM

'Sir, you cannot give me an instance of any man who is permitted to lay out his own time contriving not to have tedious hours.'

HUMAN NATURE

[*To Boswell*] 'Sir, are you so grossly ignorant of human nature, as not to know that a man may be very sincere in good principles, without having good practice?'

STUDY

Mankind have a great aversion to intellectual labour; but even supposing knowledge to be easily attainable, more people would be content to be ignorant than would take even a little trouble to acquire it.

APPLICATION

'Idleness is a disease which must be combated; but I would not advise a rigid adherence to a particular plan of study. I myself never persisted in any plan for two days together. A man ought to read just as his inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good.'

EDUCATION

People have now-days got a strange opinion that every thing should be taught by lectures. Now, I cannot see that lectures can do so much good as reading the books from which the lectures are taken.

'Last winter [*1761–2, aged 53*] I went down to my native town, where I found the streets much narrower and shorter than I thought I had left them, inhabited by a new race of people, to whom I was very little known.'

VALETUDINARIANISM

There is nothing against which an old man should be so much upon his guard as putting himself to nurse.

A GHOST

All argument is against it; but all belief is for it.

POST-MORTEM

As he opened a note which his servant brought to him on his death-bed, he said, 'An odd thought strikes me: we shall receive no letters in the grave.'

SOCIETY

AUTHORITY

'Sir, I am a friend to subordination, as most conducive to the happiness of society. There is a reciprocal pleasure in governing and being governed.'

MUTUALISM

'In civilized society we all depend upon each other, and our happiness is very much owing to the good opinion of mankind. Now, Sir, in civilized society, external advantages make us more respected. A man with a good coat upon his back meets with a better reception than he who has a bad one. Sir, you may analyze this, and say what is there in it? But that will avail you nothing, for it is a part of a general system. Pound St. Paul's Church into atoms, and consider any single atom; it is, to be sure, good for nothing: but, put all these atoms together, and you have St. Paul's Church. So it is with human felicity, which is made up of many ingredients, each of which may be shewn to be very insignificant. In civilized society, personal merit will not serve you so much as money will. Sir, you may make the experiment. Go into the street, and give one man a lecture on morality, and another a shilling, and see which will respect you most.'

TOLERATION

Every man has a right to utter what he thinks truth, and every other man has a right to knock him down for it. Martyrdom is the test.

FRIENDSHIP

Most friendships are formed by caprice or by chance, mere confederacies in vice or leagues in folly.

SOCIABILITY

'Sir, I look upon every day to be lost, in which I do not make a new acquaintance.'

INTRODUCTIONS

Nothing is more common than mutual dislike, where mutual approbation is particularly expected.

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

'Sir, there are people whom one should like very well to drop, but would not wish to be dropped by.'

REPUTATION

Alas! Reputation would be of little worth were it in the power of every concealed enemy to deprive us of it.

KEEPING SECRETS

The vanity of being known to be trusted with a secret, is generally one of the chief motives to disclose it; for, however absurd it may be thought to boast an honour by an act which shows that it was conferred without merit, yet most men seem rather inclined to confess the want of virtue than of importance, and more willingly show their influence, though at the

expense of their probity, than glide through life with no other pleasure than the private consciousness o fidelity which, while it is preserved, must be without praise, except from the single person who tries and knows it.

SOCIAL POSITION

'Sir, the superiority of a country-gentleman over the people upon his estate is very agreeable; and he who says he does not feel it to be agreeable, lies; for it must be agreeable to have a casual superiority over those who are by nature equal with us.'

BREEDING

The difference between a well-bred and an ill-bred man is this: One immediately attracts your liking, he other your aversion. You love the one till you find reason to hate him; you hate the other till you find reason to love him.

IN COMPANY

'Sir, there is nothing by which a man exasperates most people more, than by displaying a superior ability or brilliancy in conversation. They seem pleased at the time; but their envy makes them curse him in their hearts.'

ADVICE

The advice that is wanted is commonly unwelcome, and that which is not wanted is evidently impertinent.

CONVERSATION

The happiest conversation is that of which nothing is distinctly remembered but a general effect of pleasing impression.

*

That is the happiest conversation where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm interchange of sentiments.

LETTER-WRITING

Do not fancy that an intermission of writing is a decay of kindness. No man is always in a disposition to write; nor has any man at all times something to say.

CANT

[*To Boswell*] 'My dear friend, clear your *mind* of cant. You may *talk* as other people do: you may say to a man, "Sir, I am your most humble servant." You are *not* his most humble servant. You may say, "These are bad times; it is a melancholy thing to be reserved to such times." You don't mind the times. You tell a man, "I am sorry you had such bad weather the last day of your journey, and were so much wet." You don't care six-pence whether he is wet or dry. You may *talk* in this manner; it is a mode of talking in Society: but don't *think* foolishly.'

FALSE PRETENCE

Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

BELLIGERENT PROPAGANDA

Among the calamities of war, may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates, and credulity encourages.

TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying, that there is so much falsehood in the world.

MORALITY

Boswell described . . . an impudent fellow from Scotland, who . . . maintained that there was no distinction between virtue and vice. *Dr. Johnson:* 'Why, Sir, if the fellow does not think as he speaks, he is lying; and I see not what honour he can propose to himself from having the character of a liar. But if he does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, Sir, when he leaves our houses let us count our spoons.'

ACCURACY

On Boswell's calling a mountain 'immense': 'No,' said Dr. Johnson, 'but 'tis a considerable protuberance.'

ADVERTISING

Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement.

SALESMANSHIP

Lord Lucan tells a very good story, which, if not precisely exact, is certainly characteristical: that when

the sale of Thrale's brewery was going forward, Johnson (who was an executor) appeared bustling about, with an ink-horn and pen in his button-hole, like an excise-man; and on being asked what he really considered to be the value of the property which was to be disposed of, answered, 'We are not here to sell a parcel of boilers and vats, but the potentiality of growing rich, beyond the dreams of avarice.'

LONDON

'Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.'

*

The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it. I will venture to say, there is more learning and science within the circumference of ten miles from where we now sit, than in all the rest of the kingdom.

*

'Why, Sir, Fleet-street has a very animated appearance; but I think the full tide of human existence is at Charing-cross.'

*

'Sir, if you wish to have a just notion of the magnitude of this city, you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares, but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts. It is not in the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London consists.'

DOMESTICITY

DOMESTIC HAPPINESS

The great end of prudence is to give cheerfulness to those hours which splendour cannot gild, and acclamation cannot exhilarate. Those soft intervals of unblended amusement, in which a man shrinks to his natural dimensions, and throws aside the ornaments, or disguises which he feels, in privacy, to be useless incumbrances, and to lose all effect when they become familiar. *To be happy at home* is the ultimate result of all ambition; the end to which every enterprise and labour tends, and of which every desire prompts the prosecution. It is indeed at home that every man must be known, by those who would make a just estimate either of his virtue, or felicity; for smiles and embroidery are alike occasional, and the mind is often dressed for show in painted honour, and fictitious benevolence.

ILLNESS

How few of his friends' houses would a man choose to be at when he is sick.

HOUSE PRIDE

Dr. Johnson was asked if he ever disputed with his wife: 'Perpetually (said he); my wife had a particular reverence for cleanliness, and desired the praise of neatness in her dress and furniture, as many ladies do, till they become troublesome to their best friends, slaves to their own besoms, and only sigh for the hour of sweeping their husbands out of the house as dirt and useless lumber.'

DOMESTIC ECONOMY

Get as much force of mind as you can. Live within your income. Always have something saved at the end of the year. Let your imports be more than your exports, and you'll never go far wrong.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

'He knew,' he said, 'a clergyman of small income, who brought up a family very reputably which he chiefly fed with apple dumplins.'

INFANT WELFARE

Boswell—'If, Sir, you were shut up in a castle, and a newborn child with you, what would you do?' *Johnson*—'Why, Sir, I should not much like my company.' *Boswell*—'But would you take the trouble of rearing it?' He seemed, as may well be supposed, unwilling to pursue the subject: but upon my persevering in my question, replied, 'Why yes, Sir, I would; but I must have all conveniences. If I had no garden, I would make a shed on the roof, and take it there for fresh air. I should feed it, and wash it much, and with warm water to please it, not with cold water to give it pain.' *Boswell*—'But, Sir, does not heat relax?' *Johnson*—'Sir, you are not to imagine the water is to be very hot. I would not *coddle* the child.'

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

'Babies do not want to hear about babies; they like to be told of giants and castles, and of somewhat which can stretch and stimulate their little minds.'

[*Mrs. Thrale drew Dr. Johnson's attention to 'the numerous editions of* Tommy Prudent *or* Goody Two Shoes.'] 'Remember always,' said he, 'that the parents buy the books, and that the children never read them.'

DRESSING

It is wonderful how much time some people will consume in dressing: taking up a thing and looking at it, and laying it down, and taking it up again. Every one should get the habit of doing it quickly.

INSOMNIA

Keep yourself cheerful. Lie in bed with a lamp, and when you cannot sleep and are beginning to think, light your candle and read. At least light your candle; a man is perhaps never so much harassed by his own mind in the light as in the dark.

READING IN BED

'I used formerly, when sleepless in bed, *to read like a Turk*.'

HOLIDAY HINTS

1. Turn all care out of your head as soon as you mount the chaise.
2. Do not think about frugality; your health is worth more than it can cost.
3. Do not continue any day's journey to fatigue.
4. Take now and then a day's rest.
5. Get a smart sea-sickness, if you can.
6. Cast away all anxiety, and keep your mind easy.

I [*Boswell*] recollect him one day scrambling up Dr. Johnson's breast, apparently with much satisfaction, while my friend smiling and half-whistling, rubbed down his back, and pulled him by the tail; and when I observed he was a fine cat, saying, 'Why yes, Sir, but I have had cats whom I liked better than this'; and then as if perceiving Hodge to be out of countenance, adding, 'but he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed.'

PEOPLE

ENGLISHMEN

'Sir, two men of any other nation who are shewn into a room together, at a house where they are both visitors, will immediately find some conversation. But two Englishmen will probably go each to a different window, and remain in obstinate silence. Sir, we as yet do not enough understand the common rights of humanity.'

PROFESSIONAL MEN

'Sir, there must be a kind of solemnity in the manner of a professional man.'

MEDICAL MEN

'I believe every man has found in physicians great liberality and dignity of sentiment, very prompt effusions of beneficence, and willingness to exert a lucrative art, where there is no hope of lucre.'

DR. ROBERT LEVETT

His virtues walk'd their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
And sure the Eternal Master found
His single talent well employ'd.

DR. MEAD

Dr. Mead lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any man.

VISITORS

'You have more than once wondered at my complaint of solitude when you hear that I am crowded with visits. *Inopem me copia fecit.* Visitors are no proper companions in the chamber of sickness. They come when I could sleep or read, they stay till I am weary, they force me to attend when my mind calls for relaxation, and to speak when my powers will hardly actuate my tongue. The amusements and consolations of languor and depression are conferred by familiar and domestic companions, which can be visited or called at will and can occasionally be quitted or dismissed, who do not obstruct accommodation by ceremony, or destroy indolence by awakening effort.'

ADMIRERS

It was near the close of Dr. Johnson's life that two young ladies, who were warm admirers of his works but had never seen himself, went to Bolt Court and, asking if he was at home, were shown upstairs where he was writing. He laid down his pen on their entrance; and, as they stood before him, one of the females repeated a speech of some length previously prepared for the occasion. It was an enthusiastic effusion which, when the speaker had finished, she panted for her idol's reply. What was her mortification when all he said was: 'Fiddle-de-dee, my dear.'

THE YOUNG

'Sir, I love the acquaintance of young people; because, in the first place, I don't like to think myself growing old. In the next place, young acquaintances

must last longest, if they do last; and then, Sir, young men have more virtue than old men; they have more generous sentiments in every respect. I love the young dogs of this age.'

UNDERGRADUATES

On Boswell's observing that Johnson's nonchalant admission to his tutor at Pembroke that he had been 'sliding in Christ Church meadow,' when he should have been waiting upon him, showed 'great fortitude of mind.' 'No, Sir; stark insensibility.'

*

Being himself a poet, Dr. Johnson was peculiarly happy in mentioning how many of the sons of Pembroke were poets; adding with a smile of sportive triumph, 'Sir, we are a nest of singing birds.'

DONS

Professors forget their friends.

THE HIGH-TABLE

'Sir, it is a great thing to dine with the Canons of Christ-Church.'

OF A WORTHY GENTLEMAN WHO FORGOT HIS OWN NAME

'Sir, that was a morbid oblivion.'

ANTIQUARIES

A mere antiquarian is a rugged being.

A PHILOSOPHER

Being in company with a gentleman who thought fit to maintain Dr. Berkeley's ingenious philosophy, that nothing exists, but as perceived by some mind; when the gentleman was going away, Dr. Johnson said to him, 'Pray, Sir, don't leave us; for we may perhaps forget to think of you, and then you will cease to exist.'

A CIRCUS PERFORMER

On being told by Boswell that he had been to see a man ride upon three horses: 'Such a man, Sir, should be encouraged; for his performances shew the extent of the human powers in one instance, and thus tend to raise our opinion of the faculties of man.'

SAILORS

No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a gaol; for being in a ship is being in a gaol, with the chance of being drowned.

*

On someone remarking that there are people 'fond of being sailors,' Dr. Johnson said: 'I cannot account for that, any more than I can account for other strange perversions of imagination.'

Mr. Ogilvie was unlucky enough to choose for the topick of his conversation the praises of his native country . . . he observed, that Scotland had a great many noble wild prospects. *Johnson*—'I believe, Sir, you have a great many. Norway, too has noble wild prospects; and Lapland is remarkable for prodigious noble wild prospects. But, Sir, let me tell you, the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that leads him to England.'

*

Much may be made of a Scotchman, if he be *caught* young.

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE III

His Majesty enquired if Dr Johnson was then writing anything. He answered, he was not, for he had pretty well told the world what he knew, and must now read to acquire more knowledge. The King, as it should seem with a view to urge him to rely on his own stores as an original writer, and to continue his labours, then said, 'I do not think you borrow much from anybody.' Dr. Johnson said, he thought he had already done his part as a writer. 'I should have thought so too, (said the King), if you had not written so well.' Dr. Johnson observed to Boswell upon this, that 'No man could have paid a handsomer compliment; and it was fit for a King to pay. It was decisive.' When asked by another friend, at Sir Joshua Reynolds's, whether he made any reply to this high compliment, he answered, 'No, Sir. When the King had said it, it was to be so. It was not for me to bandy civilities with my Sovereign.'

Date: Monday 27 March 1775.

Place: Strahan, the printer's yard.

'Some people tell you that they let themselves down to the capacity of their hearers. I never do that, Sir. Let a man speak intelligibly and uniformly.' . . . 'Well, my boy,' said Dr. Johnson, 'how do you go on?' —'Pretty well, Sir. But they are afraid I an't strong enough for some parts of the work.' *Johnson*—'Why I shall be sorry for it: for when you consider with how little mental power and corporeal labour a printer can get a guinea a week, it is a very desirable business for you.' (The words were pretty exactly these; and the little, short, thick-legged, smircking urchin, as one may say, was shaking himself and rubbing his pockets, while Johnson rolled superb.) 'Do you hear,—take all the pains you can; and if this does not do, we must think of some other way of life for you. There's a guinea.'

WOMEN

'There is nothing that so much seduces reason from vigilance, as the thought of passing life with an amiable woman; and if all could happen that a lover fancies, I know not what other terrestrial happiness would deserve pursuit.'

*

'If I had no duties, and no reference to futurity, I would spend my life in driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman; but she should be one who could understand me, and would add something to the conversation.'

LADY FRIENDS

The endearing elegance of female friendship.

'Sir, she had read the old romances, and had got into her head the fantastical notion that a woman of spirit should use her lover like a dog. So, Sir, at first she told me that I rode too fast, and she could not keep up with me; and, when I rode a little slower she passed me, and complained that I lagged behind. I was not to be made the slave of caprice; and I resolved to begin as I meant to end. I therefore pushed on briskly, till I was fairly out of her sight. The road lay between two hedges, so I was sure she could not miss it; and I contrived that she should soon come up with me. When she did, I observed her to be in tears.'

ACTRESSES

According to Garrick Dr. Johnson decided, 'from considerations of rigid virtue,' to give up frequenting the Green Room; saying 'I'll come no more behind your scenes, David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities.'

WOMEN PREACHERS

'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.'

WOMEN PAINTERS

Dr. Johnson thought portrait-painting an improper employment for a woman. 'Publick practice of any art,' he observed, 'and staring in men's faces, is very indelicate in a female.'

BLUE-STOCKINGS

A man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek.

*

Supposing a wife to be of a studious or argumentative turn, it would be very troublesome; for instance, —if a woman should continually dwell upon the subject of the Arian heresy.

RE-MARRIAGE

A gentleman who had been very unhappy in marriage, married immediately after his wife died: Dr. Johnson said it was the triumph of hope over experience.

SEX ANTAGONISM

Women have a perpetual envy of our vices; they are less vicious than we, not from choice, but because we restrict them; they are the slaves of order and fashion; their virtue is of more consequence to us than our own, so far as concerns this world.

NAGGING WOMEN

The freaks and humours and spleen and vanity of women, as they embroil families in discord, and fill houses with disquiet, do more to obstruct the happiness of life in a year than the ambition of the clergy in many centuries. It has been well observed that the misery of man proceeds not from any single crush of overwhelming evil, but from small vexations continually repeated.

BEAUTY IN WOMEN

The bloom and softness of the female sex are not to be expected among the lower classes of life, whose faces are exposed to the rudeness of the climate, and whose features are sometimes contracted by want, and sometimes hardened by blasts. Supreme beauty is seldom found in cottages, or workshops, even where no real hardships are suffered. To expand the human face to its full perfection, it seems necessary that the mind should co-operate by placidness of content, or consciousness of superiority.

SEX APPEAL

'Were it not for imagination, Sir, a man would be as happy in the arms of a chambermaid as of a Duchess.'

CONVENTUAL LIFE

If convents should be allowed at all, they should only be retreats for persons unable to serve the publick, or who have served it. It is our first duty to serve society, and, after we have done that, we may attend wholly to the salvation of our own souls. A youthful passion for abstracted devotion should not be encouraged.

OLD MAIDS

Old maids seldom give those that frequent their conversation any exalted notions of the blessings of liberty; for, whether it be that they are angry to see with what inconsiderate eagerness other luckless females rush into slavery, or with what absurd vanity the married ladies boast the change of their condition,

and condemn the heroines who endeavour to assert the natural dignity of their sex; whether they are conscious that, like barren countries, they are free only because they were never thought to deserve the trouble of a conquest, or imagine that their sincerity is not always unsuspected, when they declare their contempt of men; it is certain that they generally appear to have some great and incessant cause of uneasiness, and that many of them have been at last persuaded, by *powerful rhetoricians*, to try the life which they had so long condemned, and put on the bridal ornaments at a time when they least became them.

QUEEN ANNE

Being asked if he could remember Queen Anne, he had, he said, a confused, but somehow a sort of solemn recollection of a lady in diamonds, and a long black hood.

LADY (ALEXANDER) MACDONALD

This woman would sink a ninety gun ship, she is so dull, so heavy.

RECREATION

PLEASURE

No man is a hypocrite in his pleasures.

TRAVEL

A man who has not been in Italy, is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see. The grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean. On those shores were the four great Empires of the world; the Assyrian, the Persian, the Grecian, and the Roman. All our religion, almost all our law, almost all our arts, almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean.

SPEEDING

Driving rapidly along in the post-chaise with Boswell, Dr. Johnson said: 'Life has not many things better than this.'

TAVERNS

There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.

*

A tavern chair is the throne of human felicity.

*

'As soon as I enter the door of a tavern, I experience an oblivion of care, and a freedom from solicitude: when I am seated I find the master courteous, and

the servants obsequious to my call; anxious to know and ready to supply my wants: wine there exhilarates my spirits, and prompts me to free conversation and an interchange of discourse with those whom I most love: I dogmatise and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight.'

DEFINITION OF A CLUB

An assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions.

NIGHT LIFE

One night when Beauclerk and Langton had supped at a tavern in London, and sat till about three in the morning, it came into their heads to go and knock up Johnson, and see if they could prevail on him to join them in a ramble. They rapped violently at the door of his chambers in the Temple, till at last he appeared in his shirt, with his little black wig on the top of his head, instead of a nightcap, and a poker in his hand, imagining, probably, that some ruffians were coming to attack him. When he discovered who they were, and was told their errand, he smiled, and with great good humour agreed to their proposal: 'What, is it you, you dogs! I'll have a frisk with you.'

SUNDAY

It should be different from another day. People may walk, but not throw stones at birds.

LORD'S DAY OBSERVANCE

To one who 'lamented the enormous wickedness of the times' because he saw some bird-catchers were

busy (on Streatham Common) one fine Sunday morning, Dr. Johnson observed: 'While half the Christian world is permitted to dance and sing and celebrate Sunday as a day of festivity, how comes your puritanical spirit so offended with frivolous and empty deviations from exactness? Whoever loads life with unnecessary scruples, Sir, provokes the attention of others on his conduct, and incurs the censure of singularity, without reaping the reward of superior virtue.'

CARDS

'I am sorry I have not learnt to play at cards. It is very useful in life; it generates kindness and consolidates society.'

GAMBLING

'Sir, I do not call a gamester a dishonest man; but I call him an unsocial man, an unprofitable man. Gaming is a mode of transferring property without producing any intermediate good. Trade gives employment to numbers, and so produces intermediate good.'

HUNTING

It is very strange, and very melancholy, that the paucity of human pleasures should persuade us ever to call hunting one of them.

PLAYING THE VIOLIN

'There is nothing, I think, in which the power of art is shown so much as in playing on the fiddle. In all other things we can do something at first. Any

man will forge a bar of iron, if you give him a hammer; not so well as a smith, but tolerably. A man will saw a piece of wood, and make a box, though a clumsy one; but give him a fiddle and a fiddle-stick, and he can do nothing.'

SCULPTURE

The value of statuary is owing to its difficulty. You would not value the finest head cut upon a carrot.

SITTING FOR ONE'S PORTRAIT

'Sir, among the anfractuosities of the human mind, I know not if it may not be one, that there is a superstitious reluctance to sit for a picture.'

BOTANIZING

On being asked if he was a botanist: 'No, Sir, I am not a botanist; and [alluding, no doubt, to his near sightedness] should I wish to become a botanist, I must first turn myself into a reptile.'

DANCING

On being asked to comment on 'a ludicrous paragraph in the newspapers' that he was taking dancing lessons: 'Why should not Dr. Johnson add to his other powers a little corporeal agility?'

KNITTING

'Knitting of stockings is a good amusement. As a freeman of Aberdeen I should be a knitter of stockings.'

POLYGLOTTISM

The praises which some have received for their multiplicity of languages may be sufficient to excite industry, but can hardly generate confidence.

REPARTEE

A fellow having attacked him with some coarse raillery, Dr Johnson answered him thus, 'Sir, your wife, *under pretence of keeping a bawdy-house*, is a receiver of stolen goods.' [*It was then the* 'rude custom' *of people sailing on the Thames to exchange ribald abuse with one another.*]

*

Boswell—'But I wonder, Sir, you have not more pleasure in writing, than in not writing.'

Johnson—'Sir, you *may* wonder.'

GASTRONOMY

'There is a time of life, Sir, when a man requires the repairs of a table.'

APPETITE

A man who rides out for an appetite consults but little the dignity of human nature.

COOKERY BOOKS

'I could write a better book of cookery than has ever yet been written; it should be a book upon philosophical principles.'

GULOSITY

'Some people have a foolish way of not minding, or pretending not to mind, what they eat. For my part, I mind my belly very studiously, and very carefully; for I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else.'

DINING-OUT

'Sir, when a man is invited to dinner, he is disappointed if he does not get something good.'

SCOTTISH BREAKFAST

If an epicure could remove by a wish, in quest of sensual gratifications, wherever he had supped, he would breakfast in Scotland.

DRINKING

Few people have intellectual resources sufficient to forego the pleasures of wine. They could not otherwise contrive how to fill the interval between dinner and supper.

INEBRIETY

A man, who has been drinking wine at all freely, should never go into a new company. With those who have partaken wine with him, he may be pretty well in unison; but he will probably be offensive, or appear ridiculous, to other people.

CLARET

'Poor stuff! No, Sir, claret is the liquor for boys; port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero (*smiling*) must drink brandy.'

PICKLES

'Sir, there is no harm done to any body by the making of pickles, or the eating of pickles.'

LETTERS

LITERATURE

The chief glory of every people arises from its authors.

OF THE MAKING OF BOOKS

'I wonder that so many people have written who might have let it alone.'

DEFINITION OF POETRY

'Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all *know* what light is; but it is not easy to *tell* what it is.'

COMPOSITION

A man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it.

*

'It has been said, there is pleasure in writing, particularly in writing verses. I allow you may have pleasure from writing, after it is over, if you have written well; but you don't go willingly to it again. I know when I have been writing verses, I have run my finger down the margin, to see how many I had made, and how few I had to make.'

AUTHORS

There seems to be a strange affectation in authors of appearing to have done everything by chance.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

It is a rule never to be forgotten, that whatever strikes strongly, should be described while the first impression remains fresh upon the mind.

AUTHORSHIP

The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write: a man will turn over half a library to make one book.

BIOGRAPHY

Nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him.

ANNOTATION

Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils.

QUOTATION

On Wilkes's censure of it as pedantry: 'No, Sir, it is a good thing; there is a community of mind in it. Classical quotation is the *parole* of literary men all over the world.'

READING

It is strange that there should be so little reading in the world, and so much writing. People in general do not willingly read, if they can have any thing else to amuse them. There must be an external impulse; emulation or vanity, or avarice. The progress which the understanding makes through a book, has more

pain than pleasure in it. Language is scanty, and inadequate to express the nice gradations and mixtures of our feelings. No man reads a book of science from pure inclination. The books that we do read with pleasure are light compositions, which contain a quick succession of events.

*

Books that you may carry to the fire, and hold readily in your hand, are the most useful after all.

AUTHORS AND THE PUBLIC

People may be taken in once, who imagine that an author is greater in private life than other men. Uncommon parts require uncommon opportunities for their exertion.

MUTUAL ADMIRATION

The reciprocal civility of authors is one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life.

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

'What will be its fate I know not, nor think much, because thinking is to no purpose. It must stand the censure of the *great vulgar and the small*; of those that understand it not. But in all this, I suffer not alone; every writer has the same difficulties, and, perhaps, every writer talks of them more than he thinks.'

PATRONAGE

To the Right Honourable The Earl of Chesterfield

February 7, 1755

My Lord,—I have been lately informed, by the proprietor of *The World*, that two papers, in which

my Dictionary is recommended to the publick, were written by your Lordship. To be so distinguished, is an honour, which, being very little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

When, upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your Lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address; and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre*;—that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world contending; but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in publick, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

Seven years, my Lord, have now passed, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a Patron before.

The shepherd in Virgil grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks.

Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and

cannot enjoy it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the Publick should consider me as owing that to a Patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself.

Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less; for I have been long wakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation, my Lord, your Lordship's most humble, most obedient servant,—Sam. Johnson.

TO AN AUTHOR WHO COMPLAINED OF ADVERSE CRITICISM

'Nay, Sir, do not complain. It is advantageous to an author that his book should be attacked as well as praised. Fame is a shuttlecock. If it be struck only at one end of the room, it will soon fall to the ground. To keep it up, it must be struck at both ends.'

LITERARY CRITICISM

You *may* abuse a tragedy, though you cannot write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables.

THE CRITIC'S DILEMMA

Nobody has a right to put another under such a difficulty, that he must either hurt the person by telling the truth, or hurt himself by telling what is not true.

ADVICE TO AN AUTHOR

To a female dramatist who complained that she could spare no time herself to look over her tragedy because (said she) 'I have no time. I have already so many irons in the fire.' 'Why then, Madam,' said Dr. Johnson, quite out of patience, 'the best thing I can advise you to do is to put your tragedy along with your irons.'

THEATRICAL AGENTS

'Of all authors those are the most wretched who exhibit their productions on the theatre, and who are to propitiate first the manager and then the public. Many an humble visitant have I followed to the doors of these lords of the drama, seen him touch the knocker with a shaking hand, and after long deliberation adventure to solicit entrance by a single knock; but I never stayed to see them come out from their audience, because my heart is tender and, being subject to frights in bed, I would not willingly dream of an author.'

POPE'S 'HOMER'

'Sir, it is the greatest work of the kind that has ever been produced.'

'GULLIVER'S TRAVELS'

When once you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest.

CHESTERFIELD'S 'LETTERS'

They teach the morals of a whore, and the manners of a dancing master.

Dr. Blair, relying on the internal evidence of their antiquity, asked Dr. Johnson whether he thought any man of a modern age could have written such poems? Dr. Johnson replied, 'Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children.'

OSSIANIC POETRY

'Sir, a man might write such stuff for ever, if he would *abandon* his mind to it.'

TO THE AUTHOR OF THE OSSIANIC IMPOSTURE

Mr. James Macpherson,—I received your foolish and impudent letter. Any violence offered me I shall do my best to repel; and what I cannot do for myself, the law shall do for me. I hope I shall never be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat, by the menaces of a ruffian.

What would you have me retract? I thought your book an imposture; I think it an imposture still. For this opinion I have given my reasons to the publick, which I here dare you to refute. Your rage I defy. Your abilities, since your Homer, are not so formidable; and what I hear of your morals, inclines me to pay regard not to what you shall say, but to what you shall prove. You may print this if you will.—Sam Johnson.

TESTIMONIAL TO HIMSELF

Sir Joshua Reynolds heard him say: 'There are two things which I am confident I can do very well: one is an introduction to any literary work, stating what it is to contain, and how it should be executed in the

most perfect manner; the other is a conclusion, showing from various causes why the execution has not been equal to what the author promised to himself and to the publick.'

JOSEPH WARTON

He is the richest author that ever grazed the common of literature.

MILTON

Milton was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock; but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones.

THE POET GRAY

'Sir, he was dull in company, dull in his closet, dull every where. He was dull in a new way, and that made many people think him GREAT. He was a mechanical poet.'

THOMAS SHERIDAN

'Why, Sir, Sherry is dull, naturally dull; but it must have taken him a great deal of pains to become what we now see him. Such an excess of stupidity, Sir, is not in Nature.'

MINOR POETS

'Sir, there is no settling the point of precedency between a louse and a flea.'

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⁂

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